

## **Muslims in America: A Short History**

*Edward E. Curtis IV*

*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 144 pages.*

*Muslims in America: A Short History* is an accessible, succinct, and informative historical survey of Muslim American communities. This popular book has two key objectives: to increase non-Muslim Americans' understanding of Muslims in the United States and to foreground to

Muslim Americans themselves their own religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity (p. xi).

The story of Muslim America begins in the eighteenth century. Chapter 1, "Across the Black Atlantic: The First Muslims in North America," sketches the lives of several West African Muslims, many of them highly literate and schooled in the Islamic sciences, who were enslaved and shipped to the United States, such as Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (Job Ben Solomon), Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima, and Omar ibn Sayyid. The second chapter, "The First American Converts to Islam," moves into the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Here Curtis provides an array of highly diverse Muslim missionary activities, from the rather unsuccessful proselytization work of White American convert Alexander Russell Webb, to the steady spread of mystical Islamic teachings spearheaded by such preachers as Indian Sufi master Inayat Khan, to the Nation of Islam's ascendance as a mass-based Black liberation movement.

Chapter 3, "Twentieth-Century Muslim Immigrants: From the Melting Pot to the Cold War," surveys South Asian sailors who settled in New York City; Albanians and Bosnians who moved to Detroit and Chicago, respectively; and Syrian families who migrated to the Midwest during this period. Curtis drives home the compelling point that most Muslim immigrants in this period eventually assimilated into mainstream American life, practiced Islam as individuals and families rather than as a community (p. 52), and identified primarily in ethnic and national terms.

As chapter 4, "Religious Awakenings of the Late Twentieth Century," argues, the mass influx of Muslim immigrants, enabled by a new immigration law in 1965 that dropped existing racist quotas, caused Islamic expression to shift from the individual and the family to the community and made religion, rather than ethnicity and national origin, the primary marker of identity. In making the case for a religious revival among Muslim Americans, Curtis documents the mass establishment of Muslim schools, mosques, and Islamic associations as well as an emerging discourse and culture of religious piety. In the final chapter, "Muslim Americans after 9/11," the author emphasizes Muslim Americans' shock and condemnation of the September 11th attacks. In this vein, he discusses various bridge-building initiatives that emerged between non-Muslim and Muslim Americans, such as increasing awareness about Islam through interfaith dialogue, designed to counter the backlash of growing anti-Muslim hostility and racism.

The book's great strength is its remarkable inclusiveness: Curtis writes into the history of Muslim America any community that self-identifies as

Muslim. In so doing, he refuses to partake in the patronizing practice of excluding those Muslims who do not fit into dominant understandings of Islam. For instance, he proves just how influential and popular Ahmadiyya Muslims were among African Americans in the early twentieth century. The Ahmadiyyas were not only the first Muslim Americans to distribute mass copies of the Qur'an (p. 34), converting thereby a significant number of African Americans, but also actively supported the Black struggle against White supremacy. Curtis also gives due historical treatment to Sufi Muslims, Ithna 'Asheri Shi'a Muslims, Isma'ili Shi'a Muslims and alternative, progressive voices within the Sunni Muslim community.

Another strength of *Muslims in America* is the book's sheer accessibility. Curtis writes in a clear and straightforward manner, and the primary source documents at the end of each chapter, in addition to photos and a chronology at the end of the book, enrich the reader's learning experience. Given that this book seeks to reach and influence a mass audience, however, I was surprised at the rather bland and non-captivating cover and also, with regard to the "Further Reading" section, wondered how accessible academic journal articles are to average Americans.

A key criticism that I have of this book is that the author tends to privilege description over analysis, narration over interpretation. Indeed, there are sections where he simply describes one Muslim American community after another. But what does the author himself think? What is missing, then, is a more critical and interpretive history. For example, Curtis states that there has been a religious awakening among Muslim Americans in recent decades. But how and why, exactly, is this revival taking place? Moreover, can it be understood in isolation of American imperialism in Muslim-majority societies?

A prime problem with the book is a striking lack of any critical engagement with America's global dominance and the fundamental impact that this must inevitably have on American society. Curtis presents, for example, the response of Muslim Americans to 9/11 as monolithically apologetic, as if all they wanted to do was to show their fellow Americans how much they loved the United States and how savage and irrational these terrorists were. Although many Muslim American leaders indeed toed this problematic line, discourse at the grassroots level was far more contested and complex, as many Muslim Americans had long been deeply frustrated with American foreign policy.

Finally, although Curtis rightly foregrounds the pioneering role that Black Muslims have played – and continue to play – in Muslim American life, he fails to take into account the significant tensions that exist between

Black Muslims and immigrant (primarily Arab and South Asian) Muslims, who are more affluent and dominant. Thus, questions of class and socioeconomic hierarchy within the community are never raised.

Despite its romanticized and at times simplistic treatment of American history and politics in general, and of Muslim America in particular, Curtis' book is a useful, enjoyable, and ultimately engaging historical survey. It will be of great value not only as a popular work, but also as a general resource for students and faculty.

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